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Origen of Alexandria: The Bible and Philosophical Rationality, or: Problems of Traditional Dualisms

The thesis to be presented in this paper is relatively simple: I wish to demonstrate that a central element of rationalization, and not only in Antiquity, lies in resolving *dualisms*, or more precisely, dual models of reality. If we subscribe to Carl Friedrich Gethmann's process-oriented definition of "rationality" as "developing processes for the discursive upholding of claims to validity,"[1] then "rationalization" would be defined as the optimization of the discursive upholding of validity claims. The Christian religion asserted such validity claims in Antiquity: It intended that the consensus within a specific religious group as to the truth of certain doctrines and behavioral prescriptions should be shared by the entire society.

One notable rationalistic impulse was provided by the so-called Christian Alexandrians, and not by coincidence, as the already Hellenized Judaism of Alexandria had laid the foundations for it, and the city's character as a center of learning was fertile ground for such a rationalizing impulse.[2] The Christian Alexandrians, principally Clement of Alexandria (c. 140/150–220 CE) and Origen (c. 185–254 CE), argued for the validity of Christian precepts regarding the world and of behavioral prescriptions according to contemporary criteria of rationality; in contrast to the preceding generations of Christian theologians, they were familiar with those criteria from the source texts of Platonic and Stoic philosophy and not just from compendia or general educational tracts.[3] These Alexandrians optimized the hitherto prevalent ways of reflecting upon Christianity as it had existed from the earliest days of Christendom, from Paul in the first century and through apologists such as Justin and bishops like Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century. We can join Gethmann in regarding such a purposeful optimization of rationality as "rationalization."[4]

1 Gethmann 1995: col. 468. See also Koch 2016 and Sperber 1985:89. I published parts of this argument more extensively in my German article "Origenes und Paulus" (Markschies 2015).

2 For the relationship between religion and rationalization in general cf. especially Max Weber and his concept of the "disenchantment of the world": Drehsen 2009; Schluchter 1976.

3 See Markschies 2012.

4 Gethmann 1995: col. 463.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110446395-006

What I am concerned with herein is a single such optimization process, namely, the resolving of insufficiently complex dualisms. Here rationalization does not mean the simplification of, say, a mythological conception of the world through reduction to certain suitable principles, but rather the addition of complexity to an insufficiently complex theory. The principal aim of this paper, then, is to demonstrate that modern scholarship has failed to perceive this increased complexity through the dissolution of dualisms in its reconstruction of the teachings of the Alexandrians as an ensemble of dualisms, and in particular in its treatment of the dualism of the Bible versus Philosophy, thus leveling the *differentia specifica* between the pre-Alexandrian and Alexandrian eras of Christian theology.

For obvious reasons, I will focus on a single Christian Alexandrian, Origen, who is justifiably to be regarded as the first Christian polymath of antiquity.[5] He lived in Alexandria until the thirties of the third century, first as a teacher of grammar and student of the Platonic philosopher Ammonius Saccas, and later as a teacher at a sort of Christian private university. From the 230s until his death in the mid-250s, at the behest of the bishops of Caesarea and Jerusalem, he worked as a preacher in a small church near the port of Caesarea and as a gifted teacher at a Christian educational institution, which taught the entire educational canon of antiquity and, as its pinnacle, Christian theology.

Origen overcame the dualism of "Bible versus Philosophy," which shaped the Christian theology of the second century and in particular the so-called Gnostic systems and their contestation within the majority church, but his transcendence of it has been given too little attention in the sweep of scholarship, especially in the twentieth century. One can – with a nod to a currently popular paradigm – describe his thinking, more appropriately than in such dualisms, as a *non-hierarchical network of knowledge systems continuously reconfigured according to current requirements*. By "knowledge" – to formulate a bare-bones working definition – I mean some part of the entirety of all reality-interpreting descriptions of elements of that reality, where "reality" is understood not as something which is perceived simply as a possibility but as something asserted to be "real."[6] In using the term "system of knowledge" I am describing a systematic ordering of knowledge associated with a particular validity claim.

If "knowledge" only ever exists in multidimensional relations in which, for instance, mental and epistemic structures overlap ("Origen *knows* something" and "Origen knows *something*"), it becomes clear that systematization or ordering

5 Cf., e. g., Nautin 1977 and Vogt 2002.

6 Detel 2009:184–186; Sarasin 2011:159; for more in general: Mittelstrass 1996; Anacker 2004.

consists in a particular arrangement of knowledge according to certain of its individual relations. Such a systematization or ordering of knowledge into a knowledge system can occur in two fundamental ways: either in the form of a stable hierarchy, as in a hierarchy tree; or in the form of a network of essentially decentralized, plural nodes or foci. In an important article entitled "Was ist Wissensgeschichte,"[7] Philipp Sarasin, a historian who now teaches in Zurich, described how, in a modern conception of the history of knowledge, "knowledge systems" are viewed not as hierarchical structures of more and less useful, more and less important, or permitted and forbidden, as in previous centuries, but rather as networks of knowledge stores in which the focus is placed here or there based on circumstances. Thus, knowledge systems are comparable to neural networks in the brain, in which, rather than some central control center determining the hierarchy of all processes, neural circuitry emerges in decentralized processes – in processes that develop and pathways that perpetuate themselves.[8]

Heretofore, Origen's thinking has often been described as a singular, strictly hierarchical and therein completely stable system of knowledge; scholars were long concerned only with the question of whether the top level of this knowledge system was a theology based on biblical texts or a philosophy drawn from Platonic writings. What is surprising about this question is its construal of biblical theology and Platonic philosophy as two stable entities completely autonomous from one another, as distinct to the observer as two blocks of marble in a landscape. One need not, as Ulrich Berner did in his 1981 volume on Origen in the "Erträge der Forschung"[9] series, comb through the entirety of the secondary literature on the Alexandrian theologian, collected in three massive volumes,[10] to recognize the bitter dispute being waged among scholars as to how the two knowledge systems – biblical theology on the one hand and Platonic philosophy on the other – are hierarchized in the case of Origen. On the one hand there are very simple models: My Roman Catholic Patristic teacher in Tübingen, Hermann Josef Vogt, propounded the basic dogma of Catholic French Origen scholarship, which acknowledged the Christian Alexandrian as having been well versed in philosophy but supposed him to have remained loyal to biblical norms in all cases of conflict between biblical texts and Platonic philosophy.[11] For Vogt, as, for example, for Henri Crouzel, Origen is at core a biblical theologian, with a knowledge system

7 Sarasin 2011.
8 On the structure of neural networks see Singer 2001 and 2002.
9 Berner 1981.
10 Crouzel 1971, 1982, 1996.
11 Vogt 1999, esp. 191–195; 2002.

in which the biblical-theological and Platonic-philosophical systems are clearly hierarchized.[12] The counter-model to this interpretation, not coincidentally, was asserted by Protestant theologians such as the reformed French theologian Eugène de Faye (1860–1929), in a major, three-volume work published between 1923 and 1928.[13] According to de Faye, Origen was the first Christian thinker to introduce basic concepts of Middle Platonic philosophy into the interpretation of the Christian Bible and thus into theology; he was much more committed to philosophical concepts like the two-world doctrine, the priority of spiritual being over material reality and so on than to biblical concepts.[14]

Of course there were always moderating concepts floating around, and even Crouzel and de Faye were not so radically one-sided as I have portrayed them here for reasons of economy and illustration. The most appealing example of such a middle way comes to us via Adolf von Harnack's very late article on Origen in the fourth volume of the second edition of the Protestant encyclopaedia *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, which appeared in 1930, the year of Harnack's death.[15] On the one hand, Harnack emphasizes that Origen, with his philosophical theology, had presented "merely a variation of the post-Platonic Stoic system" and speculated in a rather elevated fashion on biblical texts from within the orbit of these philosophical orientations. On the other hand, Harnack wisely observes that this speculation is "bound in its understanding of the Bible to the rule of faith ... which the church, following in the apostolic tradition, developed from the Bible according to O(rigen) in contrast to the false understanding of the heretics."[16] The rule of faith, *regula fidei* or κανὼν τῆς πίστεως,[17] is the formulation – still free in terms of language – of basic truths of the Christian faith such as the affirmation of the one God, the one Christ and the one church. And then Harnack gives us this image: "The church gnostic is like an airship pilot; though he may lift off and rise up to the sun, his balloon is a captive one that can never lose contact with the firm ground of the rule of faith."[18]

12 Crouzel 1962:215–216; 1989:156–163.

13 De Faye 1923–1928.

14 De Faye 1928:286: "Y avait-il donc chez Origène deux homes, un philosophe et un croyant? Une cloison étanche les séparait-elle? ... Nous estimons qu'Origène m'avait aucune peine à passer de l'un à l'autre, parce que le philosophe et le croyant, le didascale et le prêtre, n'étaient que les deux côtés d'une seule et même personnalité. ... Sa philosophie était saturée d'esprit chrétien, comme sa foi était imbue de sa pensée religieuse."

15 Harnack 1930.

16 *Ibid*.:783.

17 Ohme 1998:1–17, esp. 2–3.

18 Harnack 1930:783.

No matter how the relationship between biblical theology and Platonic philosophy in Origen was defined, it was popular to describe his system of knowledge as a hierarchy of knowledge stores that could be separated into two static blocks. Harnack's differentiation between a down-to-earth interpretation of the Bible oriented towards the rule of faith, the *regula fidei*, and an aloof, airy or elevated realm of philosophical speculation is perhaps the clearest metaphor for how knowledge stores are modeled as separate entities and how systems of knowledge are seen to a great extent as hierarchically organized systems.

If we stay with the more recent history of knowledge, a notable representative of which is the aforementioned science historian Philipp Sarasin, and describe systems of knowledge much more strongly as a network of fluid hierarchizations reconfigured according to current requirements, this of course also changes how we describe the relationship between biblical theology and Platonic philosophy in Origen compared to the classic concepts of the twentieth century, represented on the one hand by Crouzel and Vogt, and on the other by de Faye and, to an extent, by Harnack.

To the question of whether Origen was loyal to the Bible or to the philosophy of Plato, one might now, somewhat flippantly, respond: "It depends."[19] It depends, for example, on whether this exegete and thinker of Antiquity was even aware of a conflict that we nowadays believe to exist. It depends on the context he was writing in at any given time, or rather, as Sarasin puts it, on "forms of representation and the mediality of knowledge." More simply, he tended to platonize less in sermons than he did in the famous "fundamental writings," Περὶ ἀρχῶν/*De principiis*.[20] To be sure, Origen's sermons were directed to his very ordinary congregants in a Mediterranean harbor town and provincial capital, while the fundamental writings are presumably the closing lecture at his private university, aimed at presenting students with a comprehensive view of all known knowledge stores against the background of the concept of God, Creation and the Revelation, together with an appropriate understanding of these. In other words, the aim of the sermons was to invite non-academics – if I may again put it in anachronistic terms – to readings of the Bible and afterwards, in the sermon, to examine more closely what they had heard.[21] In the lecture hall, by contrast, Origen's students were given to understand that the pagan canon of teachings not only fit in well with Christian theology (or "Christian philosophy," as Origen called it[22]) but

19 For this question cf. now Edwards 2002.

20 Lies 1992:6–23.

21 Markschies 1997; Monaci Castagno 1987:50–64.

22 Markschies 2007a:70–75.

should, as it were, be framed by it and integrated into a truly comprehensive, convincing and appropriate system. In other words, these teachings can be presented and learned within a hierarchical system of knowledge, which, in theory, is naturally so in accordance with God's will. But this we can label "theology as prescribed"; "theology as practiced" might well be quite different. However, though I cannot show this in detail in the present framework, the fluid structure of the network differentiates Origen's thinking in the third century from Christian concepts of the second century – for example, among the apologists of Irenaeus.

I would like, in conclusion, to illustrate my thesis once again by taking a brief look at an example – that of anthropology. For many obvious reasons, I will concentrate on one commentary; I will therefore not be looking at the homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, which I have been trying to edit for years from fragments of catenae, but will look instead at the Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, edited by Caroline Hammond Bammel,[23] which, however, is available to us only in the abridged and dogmatically corrected and/or updated Latin translation by Rufinus of Aquileia and some Greek fragments, mainly from the Byzantine Chain Commentaries, the above-mentioned catenae.[24] In this translation, completed in 406 CE, fifteen books were abridged to ten (there really is something in the old preconception that Greek was more abundant and Latin briefer, to recall once again, albeit partly with tongue in cheek, the highly problematic folk psychologies that were so popular in Antiquity[25]).

Origen wrote this commentary around 150 years before Rufinus translated it, in 243–244, after he had already lived, preached and taught in Caesarea for ten years.[26] It was the mature late work of a man who had once been a sixteen-year-old grammar teacher, but who had long since become a teacher of theology renowned throughout the Empire and a highly respected scholar, as shown by the enthusiastic graduation speech of Gregor Thaumaturgus.[27] Having dealt elsewhere with Origen's Commentary on Romans in terms of its antique literary context and its interpretative methodology,[28] I shall now concentrate on his anthropology as demonstrated in this work.

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23 Hammond Bammel 1990, 1997, 1998; on the biblical text see Hammond Bammel 1985.

24 Mühlenberg 2012; 1989.

25 Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* II 6: "eadem enim dicuntur a multis, ex quo libris omnia referserunt"; Gigon 1973.

26 Cf. the introduction by Theresia Heither to her edition and translation: Heither 1990:7–41, esp. 7–15.

27 Crouzel and Brakmann 1983; Markschies 2007a:73–74, 102–104.

28 Markschies 1999.

In Origen's eyes, anthropology undoubtedly belongs to the particularly weighty theological problems highlighted, discussed and examined by Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, the treatment and resolution of which only the similarly consummate interpreter could adequately reflect and comment upon. The Commentary's presentation of the basal constitution of man as comprising mind and body, with the soul as an intermediary between the two,[29] poses less of a problem than the freedom with which the thus-constituted man can behave – or not, as the case may be – in the face of divine law. It is this problem that I would like to look at in the following paragraphs, because it is here that the Pauline and Platonic (and also the Stoic) elements in Origen's thinking – or simply his system of knowledge – can be followed so well.

It can be shown that Origen reads his Pauline text with a solid belief that man is free in his decision-making and in his decisions for or against God.[30] Thus, for our modern tastes, Origen comes into considerable conflict with the deterministic motifs in the Epistle to the Romans, particularly in the seventh and ninth chapters. However, the matter is not as simple as might be presumed on the basis of the above-described conception of a hierarchizing conflict between the two "blocks" of a biblical – or, more precisely, Pauline – anthropology, on the one hand, and a philosophical – or, more precisely, Platonic – anthropology with Stoic elements, on the other. In the first and second book of his Commentary on Romans, Origen speaks in very Pauline terms of the power of sin[31] – for example, in the nice image of man as a house with two doors to the soul, allowing desire to enter on one side and virtue on the other. If virtue is spurned, it departs from that place, leaving the man who has thus fallen to succumb to his desires, in the way described by Paul at the beginning of the Epistle to the Romans.[32]

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29 Origenes/Rufinus, *Commentarii in epistulam ad Romanos* I 21, *ad Romanos* 1:24–25 (Hammond Bammel 1990:88, ll. 40–47 = Heither 1990:148, 10–24): "Frequenter in scripturis inuenimus et a nobis saepe dissertum est quod homo spiritus et corpus et anima esse dicatur. Uerum cum dicitur quia caro concupiscit aduersus spiritum spiritus autem aduersus carnem, media procul dubio ponitur anima quae uel desideriis spiritus adquiescat uel ad carnis concupiscentias inclinetur; et si quidem se iunxerit carni unum cum ea corpus in libidine et concupiscentiis eius efficitur, si uero se sociauerit spiritui, unus cum ea spiritus erit." Cf. also Theiler 1970.

30 For an overview see Perrone 2000; for context see Dihle 1985:124–126 and in general Benjamins 1994.

31 Heither 1990:111–126.

32 Origenes/Rufinus, *Commentarii in epistulam ad Romanos* I 21, *ad Romanos* 1:24–25 (Hammond Bammel 1990:90, ll. 85–94 = Heither 1990:152, 10–20): "Ponamus esse aliquod domicilium, in quo cum corpore et spiritu uelut cum duobus consiliariis habitet anima; pro foribus uero huius domicilii astare pietatem omnesque cum ea uirtutes; ex alia uero parte impietatem omnesque luxuriarum ac libidinum formas et expectare animae nutum, quem ex duobus pro foris obser-

At the beginning of the Commentary, then, there is not much evidence of the light image of a human being who is free to decide, which Origen depicts mainly in his Commentary on the seventh chapter, where he simply assumes it axiomatically with certain philosophical prerequisites. One can say, perhaps, that within the network of knowledge that marks Origen, the Pauline texts he admires sometimes have a strong influence, and their anthropological concepts come into the foreground, overlaying others that originate more from Platonic or Stoic philosophy.

However, in other places – or, to use Sarasin's term, within other contexts – the network of knowledge may be organized very differently. I have already pointed out how Origen, in the sixth book of the Commentary, assumes axiomatically that man has the freedom to choose for or against divine law. The human being is made in God's image and would for that reason alone be free. He is responsible to God and free for that reason as well. Only Gnostic heresies can put determination or even predestination in the place of freedom of decision.[33] However, how does Origen explain passages such as Romans 7:19 – "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do"[34] – in which Paul speaks of the good not being able to manifest itself, although the will is there? Commenting on this verse, Origen invokes the prosopopoeia (προσωποποιΐα), a typical method of literary hermeneutics drawn from the pagan art of interpretation:[35] "Paul, as a teacher of the church, himself takes on the role of the weak."[36] That is, Paul makes use of the literary device of speaking in the form of several different persons. Origen, we may

uantibus chorum introduci ad se desideret, quem repelli. Nonne, si spiritui obtemperans et meliori usa consiliario pietatis et pudicitiae ad se euocauerit chorum, ille alius spretus repudiatusque discedet?"

33 Origenes/Rufinus, *Commentarii in epistulam ad Romanos* VI 1, *ad Romanos* 6:12–14 (Hammond Bammel 1997:456, l. 28 – 457, l. 38 = Heither 1990:192, 10–21): "Illud tamen aduerte, quod ostendens in nostra potestate situm, ut non regnet in corpore nostro peccatum, praeceptum dat apostolus dicens: 'Non ergo regnet peccatum in uestro mortali corpore ad oboediendum de deriis eius.' Nisi enim esset in nostra potestate, ut non regnaret in nobis peccatum, praeceptum utique non dedisset. Quomodo ergo possibile est, ut peccatum in carne nostra non regnet? Si faciamus illud, quod idem apostolus dicit: 'Mortificate membra uestra, quae sunt super terram,' et si semper mortem Christi in corpore nostro circumferamus. Certum namque est, quia ubi mors Christi circumfertur, non potest regnare peccatum."

34 Οὐ γὰρ ὃ θέλω ποιῶ ἀγαθόν, ἀλλὰ ὃ οὐ θέλω κακὸν τοῦτο πράσσω. For one of a great many secondary works see Vollenweider 1989:339–374.

35 Villani 2008.

36 Origenes/Rufinus, *Commentarii in epistulam ad Romanos* VI 9, *ad Romanos* 7:14–25a (Hammond Bammel 1997:509, ll. 45–47 = Heither 1990:270, 22–23): "... hic iam tamquam doctor ecclesiae personam in semet ipsum suscipit infirmorum."

infer, did not perceive his interpretation of the seventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans as a philosophical remodeling of Pauline theology, espousing, against the literal sense of the Epistle, a certain position concerning man's freedom of decision; he saw it, rather, as the product of a literary analysis, the identification of the prosopopoeia. He thus, as we would put it today, linked different knowledge stores – literary, philosophical and theological – in a context-related, decentralized, non-hierarchical network, enabling him to offer a different interpretation here than in the commentary on the first chapter of the Epistle.

While the present framework does not allow me to examine the picture I have drawn here in more detail, I believe I have shown that one cannot use the dual model of a conflict between biblical texts and philosophical theories to describe the fluidity of the systems of knowledge that Origen deploys, which are reconfigured according to his current requirements. The dual, hierarchical, conflictual approach thus misses the point of his thinking. And it should be clear, without saying too much, that this flexibilization of knowledge stores in Origen may be described as a rationalization or optimization of the Christian strategy of argumentation for its claims to the validity of its own theory.

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